

## POET, ACTORS, AND AUDIENCE IN CLASSICAL INDIAN DRAMA

*Summary* — A structural analysis of conventions, concentrating on the elements of the prologue as a key to understanding the function of the theater as an institution in Indian civilization. It is my thesis that the prologue in each play serves to underline the importance of the audience in the dramatic world, while it dramatizes the actors passage into the ongoing of the dramatic action. This mode of dramatic beginning prepares the audience for the multileveled dramatic spectacle. A comparison of the prologues of *Sakuntalā*, *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Mṛcchakaṭika*, *Vikramorvaṣīya*, for example, provides rich clues about the setting, performance, structure and rhythm of the drama. Each prologue is seen as a play-within-a-play that initiates the patterned oppositions which define the structure of classical Indian drama, including verses and prose, Sanskrit and Prākṛit, authority (in the person of the Sanskrit-speaking sūtradhāra) and common sense (in the person of an actress or assistant). My interest in defining the « classical » form of Indian drama in relation to the academic Sanskrit lyric and epic poetry has emerged from my work on Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda*, recently published by Columbia University Press as *Love Song of the Dark Lord*. This work has suggested that the relations between genres, levels of literature, and levels of language in India is far more complex than is generally recognized.

Indian dramatic theory recognizes the emotional and ethical instruction afforded by the spectacle of drama, which is said to mimic the conduct of people more closely than other forms of poetry. In Bharata's mythic account, drama is a kind of holy presentation that the gods originated to offer ethical instruction through diversion when people were no longer listening to the Vedic scriptures. The first production of a play legendarily took place at the popular rainy-season festival of Indra known as the « Banner Festival ». Indian dramas are still generally presented as sources of diversion at seasonal festivals, marriages, and other auspicious occasions. Bharata stresses the profit a king will gain if he allows his subjects to enjoy dramatic performances without pay-

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\* Professor of Oriental Studies, Barnard College, Columbia University.

ment<sup>1</sup>. The ideal of education through dramatic spectacle is codified in Bharata's definition of drama (*nāṭya*). The god Brahmā speaks to the gathered demons who threaten the performance<sup>2</sup>:

In drama there is no exclusive representation of you demons or of the gods. Drama is a representation of the emotional states, of the three-fold universe. It includes concerns of duty (*dharma*), play (*krīḍa*), material gain (*artha*), peace (*śama*), mirth (*hāsyā*), war (*yuddha*), passionate love (*kāma*), and death (*vadha*). It teaches duty to those who violate duty, passionate love to those who are addicted to love; it reprimands those who behave rudely, promoted restraint in those who are disciplined; gives courage to cowards, energy to heroes; it enlightens fools and gives learning to learned men.

The characters in the plays are diverse, drawn not only from divine and exalted human stations, but from every corner of society. One does not find policemen, fishermen, dancing masters, buffoons, boorish royalty, masseurs-turned-monks, and the like in classical Sanskrit poems. The poems focus on gods and kings who obey the brahmanical lawbooks by modelling their behavior on the protective and punitive roles of various Vedic gods. The plays show humanized » kings who enjoy varied society, indulge in all diversions, and have brahman buffoons for advisors. The buffoon, called *vidūṣaka* in Sanskrit literature, in a verbal parody of his role as « wise man », is an important aid in the king's adventure. He accompanies the king everywhere and frequently commits the critical errors that propel the plot to its conclusion. He is usually in close contact with his counterparts in the realm of pleasure, the Prākṛit-speaking females, and acts as a go-between with the audience too, thus sustaining relations at various levels in the theatre. He ironically answers the king's Sanskrit with Prākṛit and is obsessed with satisfying his hunger. His gluttony and absurdity confound the brahmanical pretense of wisdom and help to undermine the authority of brahmanical law<sup>3</sup>. The range of social types represented in the plays is often used only for comic effect, but it adds to one's sense that plays were

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1. References to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are cited from the text and translation of M. Ghose, Calcutta, 1956; these are easily located in the four-volume edition of R. Kavi with the commentary of Abhinavagupta, Baroda, 1926. On the dating of the extant text, see S. K. DE, *The Problem of Bharata and Ādi-Bharata*, in « Some Problems of Sanskrit Poetics », Calcutta, 1959, pp. 156-176; cf. Ghose, text introduction pp. LXXIX-LXXXII. *Nāṭyaśāstra* XXXVI.80.

2. *Nāṭyaśāstra* I.106-109.

3. On the types of character and distribution of roles in classical drama, see *Nāṭyaśāstra*, XXXIV-XXXV. For a discussion of the values of kingship in the Gupta period, see CHARLES DREKMEIER, *Kingship and Community*, Stanford, 1962; cf. *The Laws of Manu*, VII, IX.248-313; translated by GEORG BÜHLER in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 25, Oxford, 1886. The *vidūṣaka* is mentioned in the *Kāma Sūtra*, IV, as one of the persons who provides diversion for a man-about-town (*nāgarika*); see Rangacharya, *Drama in Sanskrit*, ch. 10.

created for an audience that must have included people of varied taste and learning. This is confirmed by Kālidāsa when he says, « the play, though men have many different tastes, is the one delight of all » (*Māla-vikāgnimitra*, I.4). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* contains references to the medley of spectators who assemble to enjoy a dramatic performance<sup>4</sup>. The theatrical occasion for renewing contacts with perennial conflict of human emotion was clearly shared by the king, or rich merchant, with an audience who made demands on the playwright's ability to divert them.

Kālidāsa, like Śūdraka and Viśākhadatta, opens each of his plays with a benediction, followed by direct reference to himself and his audience. Kālidāsa's poems, by contrast, all open with a verse which designates the subject and context of the poem, on which subsequent verses elaborate. The poems contain metaphorical references to the poet's creativity, but there is no direct reference to the poet or his audience. The prologue in a classical Sanskrit play serves to underline the importance of the audience in the dramatic world, while it dramatizes the actors' ritualized passage into the ongoing universe of the dramatic action. This mode of dramatic beginning initiates the audience into the multileveled dramatic spectacle.

In Kālidāsa's dramas, each prologue is a play-within-a-play that initiates a conventional pattern of structural oppositions; these have parallels in the prologues of Śūdraka and Viśākhadatta. They include contrasts between verse and prose, Sanskrit and Prākṛit, authority (in the person of the director<sup>5</sup>) and common sense (in the person of the assistant or actress<sup>6</sup>), as well as solemnity and wit<sup>7</sup>. The prologue to Kālidāsa's best known play, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, illustrates these points.

## ABHIJÑĀNAŚĀKUNTALA

One form is water, the creator's first creation,  
One is the fire-bearing sacrifice, one is the priest,  
Others are the time-dividing sun and moon,  
The audible ether that fills the universe,

4. Though limited in size (about 400 as compared with the 15,000 spectators a Greek amphitheatre could accommodate), the diversity of the audience in an Indian theatre is clearly reflected in Bharata's theory of theatrical success, *Nāṭyaśāstra* XXVII.1-17.

5. The characteristics of the director (*sūtradhāra*) are given in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, XXXV.65-74, 98.

6. The assistant director (*pāripāśvika*) is mentioned in *Nāṭyaśāstra* XXXV.74-75; the qualities of an actress (*nāṭikīyā*) are given in general terms and terms of her role as courtesan or other heroine, XXXIV.25-70, 78-79; XXXV.81-87, 101.

7. See S. K. De, *Wit, Humour, and Satire in Sanskrit Literature*, in « Aspects of Sanskrit Literature », Calcutta, 1959, pp. 257-289.

Another men call the material source of all seeds,  
 By another living creatures are breathing —  
 May lord Śiva favor you with his eight  
 Perceptible forms.

[At the end of the Benediction the Director begins.]

Director: Madam, if your costuming is complete, please come here.

Actress : Here I am, sir. Direct the part I must play!

Director: Madam, our audience is well-educated. We shall play  
 Kālidāsa's new drama called *The Ring of Memory and*  
*and Sakuntalā*. We must be attentive to every detail of it.

Actress : With the production so well directed, sir, nothing will be  
 neglected.

Director: Madam, to tell you the real truth:  
 I don't consider the design of a production good  
 Until the connoisseurs are satisfied.  
 The minds of the best-trained actors  
 Never indulge in self-confidence.

Actress : So true—now direct the next thing to perform.

Director: A song is the best way to engage the attention of the audience.  
 This is the thing to perform now.

Actress : What season will I sing?

Director: Sing about the new summer season that is stimulating pleasure now—  
 Bathing in refreshing water  
 Swept by scented forest winds,  
 Then sleep in easy shadows,  
 Makes each day pass delightfully.

Actress : Watch the love-mad women weave  
 Wreaths from tips of tender  
 Filaments in śirīṣa flowers  
 Kissed at once by bumble bees.

Director: Madam, you sang to perfection. The mental state of this entire  
 theater is enchanted by your melody—the audience is like a  
 painting. What play should we choose to please them?

Actress : But didn't you just direct that we should perform a new  
 play named *The Ring of Memory and Sakuntalā*?

Director: Madam, I have regained consciousness. For the moment I forgot:

I was deeply captivated  
By your charming melody in song—  
As King Dushyanta was captivated  
By the swift deer he chased.

Then the king enters, chasing a deer, armed with bow and arrows, accompanied by his charioteer, who compares him with the god Śiva, who is Lord of the Animals (*Paśupati*). The king, intent on his prey, responds in an elaborate Sanskrit verse:

There he is now  
gracefully bending his neck back to glare  
as the racing chariot runs him down,  
his haunches folded into his chest  
in fear of my falling arrow—  
strewn the path with half-chewed bits  
of grass from his limp and panting mouth.  
Watch how high he leaps—bounding on air,  
barely moving on earth. (I.7)

The chase continues and the movement builds in intensity until the king is about to kill the deer. At that moment he is interrupted by two hermits who identify the deer with the sage Kaṇva's hermitage, which is the home of Śakuntalā. The scene shows the king « at play », abandoning himself to the passion of the hunt, captivated by the graceful creature of nature he is committed to killing. The king's passion (*kāma*) threatens the calm of the forest and a creature of the hermitage it is his duty (*dharma*) to protect. But the hermits remind him of his duty and order is restored<sup>8</sup>. In his encounter with Śakuntalā, the king's passion and pursuit of his prey create a disturbance of such intensity that the lovers have to undergo a trial of painful separation before order is restored and Dushyanta finds his son, Bharata, and his chaste wife.

Here, as in the other dramas of Kālidāsa, the hero's adventure draws him away from strict adherence to his orthodox role as the embodiment of duty (*dharma*) through an encounter with a woman who is extraordinary. Śakuntalā is the daughter of a nymph and a royal sage, inappropriately living in a hermitage.

The dramatic exposition of the conflict and complementarity of order and spontaneity is rooted in the ancient Indian concern with

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8. The scenes of the hunt and the hermitage heighten the sense of interpenetration between natural and social realms through action and dialogue as well as lyric poetry. The natural sphere is personified in Śakuntalā, the social sphere in King Dushyanta.

reconciling life's multiple possibilities. These are codified in classical literature into a worldly triad of duty (*dharma*), material gain (*artha*), and pleasure (*passion*), and a supermundane concern for liberation from worldly existence (*mokṣa*)<sup>9</sup>. In the context of stylized dramatic relations the resolution of social, psychological, and physical disharmonies was enacted, encoded in elaborate verses, dialogues, dance gestures, sounds, and signs of emotion. The concentration on subtle manifestations of changing erotic emotion, or passionate loyalty, can be appreciated today, even in translated versions, as paradigms for understanding the frustration and fulfillment of human desire and ambition in a complex world.

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9. The relation between these concerns, known as the « pursuits of a person » (*puruṣārtha*), is widely debated in Indian literature of the classical period. The best debate is found in chapter II of *The Kāma Sūtra of Vatsyayana*, translated by Sir Richard Burton, New York, 1962. The four form the organizing principle of the book *Classical India, Readings in World History*, vol. 4, edited by W.H. McNeill and J.W. Sedlar, Oxford, 1969. See also Karl Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963, pp. 5-11, for a succinct statement on these « four attitudes »; McKIM MARRIOTT, *The Feast of Love*, in « Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes », edited by Milton Singer, Honolulu, 1966, pp. 200-212; RICHARD ROBINSON, *Humanism versus Asceticism in Āśvaghoṣa and Kālidāsa*, in « Journal of South Asian Literature », vol. XII, nos. 3-4, 1977, pp. 1-10.